

Head of U.K. program that tracks COVID-19 variants says virus may have reached 'plateau' in terms of evolution

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Pedestrians walk past a COVID-19 public health sign in London, on Feb. 25, 2021.

KIRSTY WIGGLESWORTH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The head of a British program that tracks variants of the COVID-19 virus says it may have hit “peak fitness” in terms of its ability to spread and evade vaccines.

“We seem to have reached a relative plateau, if you like, of what the virus is doing in terms of evolution,” said Sharon Peacock, director of the COVID-19 Genomics UK consortium, or COG-UK. “It could be that there’s a point at which the virus has kind of optimal fitness in terms of transmissibility and evasion of immunity, and it may be that there will be a pause. What I don’t know is what happens after that.”



GLOBE BACKGROUND



COG-UK has been a world leader in sequencing genetic changes to the virus and the consortium, which consists of a network of universities and public health agencies, has sequenced more than 300,000 genomes of the virus.

Dr. Peacock told a news conference on Tuesday that while it was unclear how the virus will continue to evolve, she remained optimistic about the battle to contain COVID-19. “I don’t anticipate that things are necessarily going to get worse,” she said. “Where we see vaccines being rolled out, disease is falling and the vaccines are looking effective. ... We’re approaching a period of time when actually the tools and the technology that we’ve developed will come to the fore and help us to combat this virus.”

She made the comments during a briefing on new research into a variant of the virus first detected in Manaus, Brazil, in November. The mutation, known as P1, has spread throughout Brazil and to 25 other countries, including the U.K. and Canada. The P1 variant contains a cluster of mutations that have also been found in the British and South African variants that were also first detected late last year. The mutations help the virus bind to human cells and evade immunity.

Researchers from Imperial College London, the University of Cambridge and the University of São Paulo found that the P1 variant was around 50 per cent more transmissible than the original version of the virus. They also concluded that it was able to reinfect between 25 and 61 per cent of people who were already immune to the original virus.

Nuno Faria, a specialist in viral evolution at Imperial College, said he also thought the virus was showing signs of “converging evolution.”

"You do see the same mutations popping up in different parts of the world completely independently and I think that's something that needs to be taken into account," Dr. Faria told the briefing. He added that increased tracking of mutations, particularly in developing countries, could still turn up novel variations. "We will see more variants once we increase sequencing in places like the global south. We will probably start seeing far more variants of interest and far more variants of concern."

Dr. Faria was also hopeful about the fight against the pandemic and the effectiveness of vaccines. "This is a period to be optimistic about the future," he said. "The more we know about the virus the better we are able to protect against it. There is no concluding evidence to suggest at this point that the current vaccines won't work against P1."

Dr. Peacock said that even though the South African and Brazilian variants are highly contagious, they have not outpaced the British mutation in the U.K.

That variant was first detected in November in Kent, southeast of London, and it now accounts for more than 80 per cent of all COVID-19 cases in Britain. Only a handful of cases of the South African and Brazilian variants have emerged in the U.K. and so far they have not spread widely. That has raised questions among scientists about how the different variants behave once they are in the same environment.

"We will learn about the relative fitness of [variants] over time in a given setting but at the moment it's clear that our lineage is prevailing against the South African variant," Dr. Peacock said. "I don't think we should make any assumptions about P1. I think we need to be on our guard, watch and go after this variant."

A number of recent studies have shown that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines work well against the U.K. variant. A report released this week by Public Health England, which studied 7.5 million people who had been vaccinated, found that both vaccines were highly effective in older people. Data from the agency showed that among people over the age of 80, both vaccines were more than 80 per cent effective in preventing hospitalization three to four weeks after a single dose.

Another study out of Scotland, involving more than one million people who had been vaccinated, found that both vaccines reduced the risk of hospitalization by up to 94 per cent.

The first big real-world study of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to be independently reviewed shows the shot is highly effective at preventing COVID-19, in a potentially landmark moment for countries desperate to end lockdowns and reopen economies.

REUTERS

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